Review Essay

Mirrors and Windows: Black Poetry in this Era

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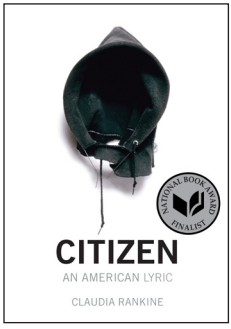

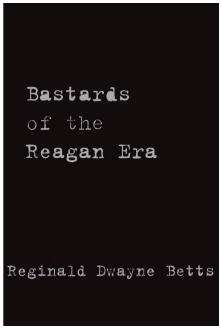

CITIZEN: An American Lyric. By Claudia Rankine. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press. 2014.
BASTARDS OF THE REAGAN ERA. By Reginald Dwayne Betts. New York, NY: Four Way Books. 2015.

I learned from Toni Morrison to rest in the "how" when asking "why" is too hard.

Begin here. Gynnya McMillen, Sandra Bland, Freddy Gray, Samuel Du Bois, Sharanda Coleman-Singleton, Cynthia Hurd, DePayne Middleton Doctor, Miz Susie Jackson and her cousin Miz Ethel Lance, Senator Reverend Clementa Pickney, Tywanza Sanders, Reverend Doctor Daniel Simmons, Sr., Pastor Myra Thompson, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, Jonathona Farrell, Renisha McBride . . .

Continue. Question how Michael Vick, Serena Williams, President Barack Obama, Florence Griffith Joyner . . . Question again. Begin here. Begin with you and I.

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To be Black in the United States in the era of Black Lives Matter is to live with a heightened sense of anxiety and awareness of race and the biopolitical realities of "Blackness" in American culture. To be non-Black means that one is on a quixotic quest to believe that the absence of "race" exempts one from the violence and criticisms that daily torment Black bodies. If one is relatively "woke" or informed about racial injustice, it means that you are attentive to an insipient racialized American consciousness and its connections to the daily humiliations Black Americans face. To be truly aware means that you understand that race is a lie and serves as a governing catalyst for terror and confusion. Race, in kind, has become a marble veined frame for the American imagination, likewise American culture. Race and culture continue to be examined by American poets, particularly Black poets who continue to painstakingly and meticulously analyze the connection.

Lyrical and Liberated Roots

In published forms, Black American writing began with Lucy Terry's 1746 ballad "Bars Fight". Her piece was followed by Phillis Wheatley's "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral" (1773) and Jupiter Hammond's "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cerise," which was published as a broadside in 1861. Each of these works spoke to liberation and documented injustice. In her work "Furious Flower: African American Poetry, An Overview", poet and writer Joanne Gabbin points out the ways in which African American poetry expresses ideas of liberation. She also reminds us that the earliest African American poets attempted to lyrically express their existence within a society that literally questioned their humanity.

Gabbin contends that this exploration was expressed in the ways Black poets intensely explored voice in the waning years of a racially charged twentieth century. She finds that African American poetry continues to be an aesthetic tradition that affirms a different king of Americanness, improvising or riffing on language and literary modes. This is most evident when examining the Black Arts Movement (BAM). The poets of that movement were inspired by racial hostility, particularly following the assassination of Malcolm X. Poets such as Amiri Baraka, Carolyn Rodgers, Haki Madhubuti and Sonja Sanchez wrote rigorous and imaginative forms of poetry that responded to the violence and social unrest of the American landscape. BAM's poetry extends the philosophies of liberation reflected in Malcolm X's political nationalism, inclusive of the strident language and at times chauvinistic way of expressing Blackness. It was youthful, radically charged, and intemperate! The writers of the BAM generation continued a legacy and expansion of what the cultural critic Addison Gayle called the Black aesthetic. It reflected a necessary and vital collectivity. It was an extension of the previous tradition and an assemblage of all the Black writers who wrote full-throated modernist poetry expressed through jazz, blues and free verse idioms from the 1920s through the 1950s. Poets as diverse as Langston

Hughes, Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks. Building off this poetic inheritance, BAM poets rebelled their way into history.

Rooted in liberation and lyrically challenging injustices, Black poetry, specifically African American poetry, has always kept a critical eye toward American culture. Because American culture is rooted in imperial and colonial exploitation, Black poetry has reflected associated tensions and struggles. Black poetry is therefore a rigorous art form and acts as a cultural archive citing the multiple struggles for freedom. Some would argue that these themes are present across the large body of African American literature. Therefore, many have made comparisons between the cultural impact of African American poetry and memoir writing used as ethnographic writing. Like memoir, Black poetry has ethnographic properties; it denotes something about racial identity and the complexities of the self, individual and collective. In doing so Black poetry speaks to a broad audience of readers, and in some cases specifically non-Black people on quite another register and with somewhat different messages. In order to ascribe value to the work Black poetry is doing in American culture, it is essential to acknowledge the influences of the African American literary canon and visual awareness on contemporary poetry collections. It is also important to consider what contemporary poetics is stating about Blackness in American culture.

Twists and Leaps of the 21st Century

Postmodern philosophies that reject the stigma of genre influence the creative diversity and fluidity present in contemporary Black poetry. Postmodern philosophies are often coupled with the attention to language and literary tradition within Black poetry. In kind, it is being enhanced to meet and extend the expectations associated with 21st century visual awareness. I will begin here - some key questions in my work explore how race and gender are embodied and performed within American culture. My work, creative and scholarly, also questions, how is one, inclusive of her intersectional identity, present in a world that blends physical, psychological, and digital spaces, particularly when each of these spaces are rapidly shifting and seemingly eroding? In light of such shifts, I am curious about how intersectional identities are expressed. In this essay questions about Black femininity and masculinity are key. They will inform my thoughts about Rankine's and Betts's collections.

Like many Black poets and writers, I reject constraints pertaining to genre. I find my mind akin to Dawn Lundy Martin's in her recent interview with Adam Fitzgerald entitled *On the Black Avant-Guard, Trigger Warnings, and Life in the East Hamptons*. Martin's ideas in this interview are central to this essay about Black poetry. In that interview Martin states, "genre, like identity, is socially constructed, but we all collude to try to make our categories seem natural, immanent." She continues to clapback against and counter the marginalization and segregation of genre by reminding us that writing - "it's not [a question of] genre . . . it's a question of form and approach." By embracing questions of form

and approach, rather than prescriptive notions of genre, the work becomes more expansive. The work begins to exceed disciplinary constraints.

Black Poetry: The Celebration

The complexity of Black poetry and the means by which it engages the American culture exceeds the limitations and expands the ideologies associated with genre of literary schools. Blackness is a specific experience that is rooted in individual and collective identity. In kind, Blackness resonates with the experiences and consequences of racialized oppression. One aim of this essay is to honor the ways contemporary Black poets continue to use form and approach to exceed these limitations.

In his blog *Cultural Front*, Howard Rambsy questions and cites the rates at which Black poets have become finalist for the national book award. Rates have increased for Black nominations and award wins. Rambsy finds that in the 1990s, there were six finalists for The National Book Award between 2000-2009; between 2010 -2015 eleven Black poets were finalists. The Black poets that have won the National Book Award: Ai (1999), Lucille Clifton (2000) Terrance Hayes (2010), Nikky Finney (2011) and Robin Coste Lewis (2015). I would be remiss not to mention the Black Pulitzer Prize winning poets Natasha Trethewey (2007), Tracey K. Smith (2012) and Gregory Pardlo (2015). It seems that Black poets are achieving recognition in the literary landscape and gaining prominence among mainstream literary audiences.

Two of the most celebrated books over the past year are Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and Reginald Dwayne Betts's *Bastards of the Reagan Era.* Both collections of Black poetry rely heavily on visual awareness as a means of articulating the collective experiences of Black people. I am inclined to believe that these books are intentional in their showings and their desires to engage in a cultural conversation concerning race. These books articulate the negotiations of race in content, form and approach. Racial injustice is popular in the media and some readers may be attracted to the works because they are seeking to expand their knowledge about race relations in the United States. Rankine and Betts craft poems using form and approach to emphasize how racism impacts Black people in American culture. In doing so, they educate readers about Blackness and the violence-associated racism.

Because the these collections are employing forms and approaches that combine language and visual awareness, I will pay special attention to how Rankine and Betts incorporate visual awareness into their work and comment on what readers stand to gain in this coupling.

Citizen: An American Lyric

Citizen: An American Lyric is Claudia Rankine's latest collection of poetry. Rankine's *Citizen* is embraced by readers as both poetry and memoir. It has been

lauded as one of the *Guardian*'s Best Politics Books of 2015, one of the *Guardian*'s Readers' Books of the Year for 2015, one of *Entropy*'s Best Nonfiction books of 2015 and one of NPR's, *The Atlantic*'s, the *Guardian's*, *Pioneer Press*, *Bitch Media*'s, and Subtext Bookstore's Best Books of 2015.

The collection was a finalist for the 2014 National Book Award in Poetry and the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism. *Citizen: An American Lyric* has won awards such as the 2015 PEN Oakland-Josephine Miles Literary Award, 2015 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award in Poetry, 2015 Forward Prize for Best Collection, 2015 PEN Open Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry, 2015 *NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work*, 2015 *Forward Prize* and the *Poets and Writers'* Jackson Poetry Prize. In 2016 Claudia Rankine was awarded the prestigious *MacArthur 'Genius' Fellowship* from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Rankine's *Citizen* attests to the complexity of the human experience in a racially oppressive society. In her poems, Rankine studies instances of racial discrimination in the context of American identity and American citizenship. Rankine's *Citizen* is a collection of prose poems that is extensive, detailing the layers associated with Blackness. Her work examines Black identity, inclusive of the ways it is performed and rendered visible. The collection of poems acts as a close examination of racial aggression in the United States. The work details the ways this specific form of aggression impacts the individual and collective lives of Black people. Rankine artfully demonstrates how racism impacts the ways Black people negotiate American citizenship rights in the face of racial humiliation. The book also becomes one lens for examining how perverse and inaccurate notions of a "post-racial" society are in this contemporary cultural landscape.

Citizen is a collection that blends 'genres' and multiple ways of knowing. There are two significant aspects to *Citizen* that I am interested in. Each speaks directly to form and approach. The first being the way Rankine disrupts traditional understandings related to genre. The form and approach in Rankine's work employs "yes, and" connotations, rather than "yes, but". "Yes, and" rather than "yes, but" is a merit based comparison Rankine introduces on in a poem. The poem reads:

> An unsettled feeling keeps the body front and center. The wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach in toward your rib cage. When you look around only you remain. Your own disgust at what you smell, what you feel, doesn't bring you to your feet, not right away, because gathering energy has become its own task, needing its own arguments. You are reminded of a conversation you had recently, comparing the merits of sentences constructed implicitly with "yes, and" rather than "yes, but". You and your friend decided that "yes, and" attested to a life with no turn-off, no alternative

> routes: you pull yourself to standing, soon enough the blouse
> is rinsed it's another week, the blouse is beneath your sweater,
> against your skin, and you smell good. (8)

This "yes, and" rather than "yes, but" connotation Rankine embraces in *Citizen* is a reflection of the some of the work the book is asking readers to do. This work the reader is asked to do includes considering the humanity of Black people. The reader's response to the work relies on previous literary traditions. Although the dialogue is not limited to art and American culture, the collection's approach and form is a type of call and response. The book is a conversation with contemporary media and early literary traditions such as the slave narrative traditions. The collection is a type of epic poem familiar in classical literatures, a form used to explore the humanity of heroic figures.

In addition, Rankine's "yes and" metaphor can be extended into her approach and form to the book that recognizes text and image as interchangeable tools. This "yes, and" approach to poetry introduces the reader to the work associated with making one visible in a culture that has proved to be hostile and lethal to Black bodies that are otherwise invisible outside of the context of violence. Her form and approach to this type of work is a type of remix, one that samples from contemporary art and media. The "samples" are rooted in a context of memory and re-emphasize how racism contributes to collective memory and trauma. Relying on the visual awareness of popular images and celebrities in American culture, the collection provides an opportunity to transition into a larger dialogue with other contexts for racialized aggression in American culture.

"Yes And": Black Femininity

In Rankine's work "yes, and" becomes a metaphor used to articulate the ways Black identity is often reduced to stereotypes. "Yes, and" speaks to the ways Black identity is made visible, human, whether voiced or rendered visual. "Yes, and" calls into question "[I]s visibility the only defense against violence and the dehumanization of Black people in American culture?

Author and owner of the Wild Fig Books & Coffee, Crystal Wilkerson and I discussed the ways Black femininity is articulated in the Rankine's collection. We think that the treatise of Serena Williams in Chapter II of *Citizen* is a significant commentary on the complexity of the intersections of race and gender, Black femininity in America. We discussed how Rankine's form and approach to Serena Williams is a testament to Rankine's genius and attention to craft. In this way, Rankine's critiques of racism take a "yes and" approach that includes perspectives about Black bodies and how intersectional narratives pertaining to gender are expressed. The "yes and" consideration adds to the complex relationship between stereotypes and hyper-visibility, gender and racism in American culture.

In Chapter II of *Citizen*, the reader learns that Serena Williams' professional success and celebrity do not exempt her from racial aggression. It addresses how

Serena Williams's Blackness and femininity put her at risk for a specific style of racist aggression. This illustration aims to contrast the ideas about tokenism and celebrity in the lives of Black Americans, thus countering the popular misconceptions that many celebrity and professional athletic careers protect Black people from racism. In this portion of the book, Rankine shows how micro-aggressions rooted in race, gender and class publically undermine the professional reputations of Black women. She also shows how these micro-aggressions are used to psychologically torture Black people, particularly Black women on an individual basis.

In this way, Rankine extends the argument of previous Black women and scholars. Historically, Black women policed their own behavior and framed their everyday actions in ideas of respectability. They acted in this way in order to socially defend themselves from racist acts. "This type of ambiguity could also be diagnosed as dissociation and would support Serena's claim that she has had to split herself off from herself and create different personae (Rankin)." This splitting of oneself, self-policing and framing is done in defense of racist remarks [and potentially violent actions] made against Black women. In kind, these acts are defensive strategies that are in direct response to the racial aggression she has experienced. Although Black women scholars and writers have written about these defensive behaviors for many decades, few have used a popular figure to illustrate the complexities.

By framing Chapter II as a type of poetic case study of Serena Williams, Rankine's poems show that the consequences for Black rage as response to racism have severe consequences in American society. This is punctuated by popular images and relies upon the readers' visual awareness of historic racism and contemporary celebrity. The chapter concludes with a picture of Caroline Wozniacki mocking and racially bulling Serena Williams. In an attempt to insult William's professional accomplishments and person, Wozniacki stuffs her uniform with towels. The act of stuffing her uniform with towels created enlarged breasts and buttocks that mimics Williams' figure. In doing so, Wozniacki attempted to reduced Williams' greatness to a stereotypical minstrel caricature that mocked Black femininity.

Because the chapter ends with a photo of Caroline Wozniacki using racialized micro-aggressions to bully Serena Williams, the reader is forced to reflect on the sequence of poems in the chapter. In kind, the reader is forced to consider that neither rage, nor passivism, nor the threat of public ridicule deters racist acts against Black people. In kind, this chapter allows Rankine's poems to illustrate that racial aggressions are public—even if these aggressions are seemingly ignored by the masses. Here Rankine shows that individual aggressions and racist acts are also aggressions against the collective of Black Americans. She shows this by documenting the amount of people attending the sporting event and the intense media coverage of the act. In doing so, Rankine implies how these micro-aggressions are used to undermine the achievements of Black Americans in front of international audiences. She also demonstrates how silence and acceptance of racialized aggression is common in the US.

Rankine's work encourages readers to seriously consider the complexities of Black femininity in the United States and learn. Rankine's poems explore the psychology of racism, ways that it is gender specific, particularly micro-aggressions and their various expressions in American culture. Because Rankine's form and approach includes studying Black identity from perspectives that are layered with documentary observations and visual stimuli, readers may develop complex levels of understanding about race in the American imagination.

In her treatment of intersectional racism, Rankine's book *Citizen* embodies Anna Julia Cooper's sentiments " Let woman's claim be as broad in the concrete as in the abstract. We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the naturalness and injustice of all special favoritism, whether sex, race, county or condition." In addition to the aforementioned, it is important to consider the ways *Citizen* most closely resembles Clifton's *Generations*. Both texts embody Anna J. Cooper statements. It is a treatment of intersectional racism that situates the experience of Black women in solidarity with humanness.

Bastards of the Reagan Era

The 2015 release of *Bastards of the Reagan Era* asserts strong criticisms of American culture and serves as one way for readers to understand Black life in a contemporary context. The poems illustrate how race, gender in terms of masculinities and economic class intersect in American identity. They also illustrate what is at risk in these intersections.

Betts's *Bastards of the Reagan Era* is his third poetry collection. Similar to Rankine's *Citizen*, the collection has garnered praise. The collection is the winner of the 2016 PEN New England Award in Poetry. It was also shortlisted for the 2016 PEN Open Book Award and was a finalist for the 2015 IndieFab Book of the Year Award. Then it made *Library Journal's* "Best Books 2015: Poetry" list, and is a finalist for the Firecracker Award in Poetry, and the National Council on Crime & Delinquency's (NCCD) 2016 Media for a Just Society Award.

The imagery in Betts's poetry is a nod to at least two literary traditions popular in the Anglophone Literary canon, the Imagist tradition and the realist documentary prose. The collection likens itself to many works of realist and documentary prose that portray cinematic renderings of Black masculinity. In kind Betts's *Bastards of the Reagan Era* is a type of coming of age story that details a long history of institutional and civic violence against Black masculinity in America. The work also uses imagery and visual awareness to illustrate the tensions between the American imagination and Black masculinities. By setting the collection within the backdrop of the national monuments and other environmental/architectural fixtures associated with the District of Columbia, Betts emphasizes American racism as a national issue. He uses the tensions between ideas of rugged individualism as a national value (often expressed in the pioneering/entrepreneurial spirit) in stark contrast to the rugged individualism that Black men defensively embrace in order to survive the impact of American

racism. Betts's work demonstrates to non-Black readers how rugged individualism is expressed as an aspect of Black masculinity and adversely labeled "savage". When Black masculinity is referred to as savage or "thug", it reinforces negative stereotypes about Black men that existed in pre-emancipated America. These stereotypes were used to justify the enslavement of Black people. The savage stereotype is so perverse in American culture that any expression of rugged individualism that is coupled with Black masculinity warrants a complete rejection of the intersectional complexities of Black manhood. In addition, the savage stereotype is used as propagandist support of hyper-surveillance and excessive incarceration of Black men. In this way, Black masculinity also becomes a "bastardized" form of American citizenship. This specific and stark contrast of American ideas is expressed in Betts imagery and illustrates the complexity of American racism and citizenship to readers.

Betts' speaker in *Bastards of the Reagan Era* is engages in a host of poetic monologues that articulate notions of Black masculinity. They also comment on how the concept of Black masculinity inhabits the American imagination. The collection makes clear how the negative stereotypes associated with Black masculinity are used to galvanize and sustain poor public policy and a lack of legitimate economic opportunities for Black men. Considering the ways this collection embraces a certain amount of pessimism, Betts' *Bastards of the Reagan Era* can be viewed [in part] as a literary nod to Elliot's *Waste Land*. T.S. Elliot's *Waste Land* (1922) is an epic poem that reflects the pessimism that followed World War I. This allusion to Elliot's work informs the reader about *Bastards'* potential to explore the pessimisms that accompanied Black masculinity during and after the Reagan administration.

The subjects in these poems are young Black men and boys that were victims of poor public policy, poverty and racism, inclusive of state sanctioned violence. I view state sanctioned violence as a broad term that blends police brutality, mass incarceration and the under-documented economy of the illegal drug trade that perpetuates violence and death at alarming rates in the Black community. These literary allusions to the *Waste Land* add to the allegorical complexity of Betts' collection.

Similar to the ways Elliot's *Waste Land* uses vignettes of contemporary British society interchangeably with referents to the American South (St. Louis), Betts uses imagery that relies on historic and cinematic renditions of Black masculinity interchangeably with tropes of American citizenship. Incorporating these 'ghosts' of American nationalism and cinema into his work adds framing for the readers and additional visual references that aid readers in contextualizing Black masculinity.

Look to part one of the title poem "Bastards of the Reagan Era" entitled 'Countdown to Armageddon'. The poem explores the tensions between mass incarceration, Black masculinity and chattel slavery in American culture. The poem illustrates that racial inequality is a long struggle that proceeds from the US' struggle for independence. In this way, Betts satirizes the glorification of

US colonial independence. Therefore, this passage prepares readers to recognize how racial equality and economic stability are inherently linked in American culture and expressed in American racism.

The "For the City that Nearly Broke Me" poems are a series of elegies, memories of all the young men who were victims to state sanctioned violence and seductive possibilities associated with rugged individualism expressed in the illegal drug trade. The kind of seductive possibilities included wealth and "leadership/ruler" opportunities that are used to promote the entrepreneurial spirit that dominated the illegal drug trade during Reagan's administration.

Betts's closing poem, "What We Know of Horses," echoes many of the themes and scenes expressed in the "For the City that Nearly Broke Me" poems and others. "What We Know of Horses" reflects the constant threat of death that Black men may or may not survive. One of the themes the poem reiterates is "history is written on the back of the horse." This theme and others serve opportunities for readers to reflect the connections Betts created in the poems "Bastards of the Reagan Era" and "For the City that Nearly Broke Me". These connections include the impact of the prison industrial complex and state sanctioned violence on Black men.

In addition, Betts's collection explores how the ideas of Black masculinity include a desire for Black men to have full access to citizenship rights, civic protection and the right to be "a man" under the constitution. In kind, he illustrates the long history about the ways citizenship rights have been denied to Black men. He shows how Black men since the middle passage have been economically exploited and victimized by poor public policies.

Betts makes an effort to keep the reader aware of the complexities of Black masculinity within the context of bastardization and the history of American fatherhood. In Betts's work, the absence of fathers and appropriate models of masculinity are two of the emotional factors that make Black men particularly receptive to the illegal drug trade, mass incarceration and murder. In many poems, Betts makes clear that many Black fathers are not available to model a parenting aspect of masculinity to a younger generation of Black men.

An alternate script pertaining to fatherhood opens Betts's collection and prepares readers to engage with the themes of fatherhood in the work. The first two poems in *Bastards of the Reagan Era* are poems for his sons. In this way, Betts documents the impact of absent fathers on Black masculinity for the reader and privileges active fatherhood as an expression of Black masculinity. Betts departure from absent fatherhood as an aspect of Black masculinity reflects some of the Black masculinity movements happening in the District of Columbia. Many men are organizing to make sure positive perceptions of fatherhood are incorporated into Black masculinity narratives. The poems opening *Bastards* affirm activist efforts such as Mike Tucker's *Daddy's Cool* Movement, which ". . . creates a new image of good dads and cool dads living for the love of their likeness" and "is set to shift stereotypes and unbalanced frames of mind on [Black] fathers today".

Betts's collection expresses some positive aspects of Black masculinities in American culture. In kind, the collection is attentive to the ways Black masculinity is under attack in a contemporary context and historically. The poems in *Bastards of the Reagan Era* are in conversation with other books in which the complexity of Black masculinity is explored in context of US citizenship. Betts's book enters a long literary legacy that includes writers like Richard Wright, James Baldwin and recently Ta-Nehisi Coates. Richard Wright's and James Baldwin's books affirm the ways that the industrialized city failed to provide a life for Black people, specifically Black men. In kind *Bastards of the Reagan Era* may also be in conversation with Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, an open letter to Coates' son about the complexities of Black identity in the United States. *Between the World and Me* has received a number of awards including: 2015 MacArthur Fellowship, 2015 National Book Award for Nonfiction, 2015 Harriet Beecher Stowe Prize for Writing and others. The geographic setting and historical era may be changed in these works, but themes such as poverty, fatherhood and the threat of incarceration [or other state sanctioned violence against Black people] are evident and illustrate Black masculinity in the American landscape.

Windows and Mirrors

I see Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Reginald Dwayne Betts's *Bastards of the Reagan Era* as collections of poetry that rely heavily on the visual awareness of readers. Deborah Willis' research on the history of photographs and Lucille Clifton's theories regarding mirrors and windows complement one another. Ideas about how African Americans employ visual awareness are central to discussion about why certain collections of Black poetry are gaining recognition within American culture.

Blackness can be defined as a type of American otherness that is often segregated within American narratives. This is important when considering ideas about Black visibility and these poets' attention to visual awareness can be framed in the context of mid-nineteenth century photography. Making one's self visible is a defensive tactic that Black Americans have employed since abolition campaigns and therefore is central to this reading. Deborah Willis reminds us that photography is a type of biography. In her book, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery*, she reminds theorists that "Black Americans' interest in photography and Black photographers' command of the technical and artistic aspects of their work support our contention that Black Americans embraced photography, not simply for its novelty or aesthetic value, but for its recognized potential to present powerful social and political arguments."

I cannot discuss Black poetry and how it informs American cultural imagination without mentioning Lucille Clifton. In a 1998 interview with Hillary Holiday, Clifton stated "that children-and humans, everybody-all need both windows and mirrors in their lives: mirrors through which you can see yourself and windows through which you can see the world." Clifton's quote inspired me to begin to

question how form and approach have been leaning toward a visual awareness since the early part of the twentieth century.

For example, as early as 1969, Lucille Clifton, the master of enjambment and poetic imagery, understood that visual awareness was one strategy for making Black humanity present. She, like Black people immediately following emancipation, recognized the potential of visual texts to render Black humanity in American culture. In her work *Generations*, Clifton alternates photographs and literary texts. *Generations* is a memoir and neo-slave narrative that told Clifton's personal history in a relation to her family legacy and by extension Black identity. By incorporating photos with the prose poem vignettes that detail her life, the photos acted as an echo to the lyrical texts' ideas and conveyed a complex interpretation of Black identity one that disrupted the stereotypes familiar to non-Black readers.

I would also like to look closer to Clifton's mirrors and windows analogy because I am interested in the ways these two authors use poetry to convey Blackness in context of historical marginalization in American culture. I am also interested in the ways each of these authors use intersectional identity and visual awareness as a means of informing readers about the multilayers and complexities of Blackness. In Betts's and Rankine's work, the reader is able to examine intersectional identities associated gender and Blackness and may be called to upon to question their conceptions of Black identity.

Lucille Clifton's ideas about mirrors and windows is a lens for considering the ways Black poets render Black humanity, particularly to non-Black readers. Lucille Clifton's mirror and windows analogy helps cultural theorists to understand the multiple ways poetry resonates with diverse audiences that may have different identities and may be informed by different cultural inheritances.

Conclusion

Artistic works that employ mirror and window strategies use craft techniques associated with form and approach. Form and approach are used to express how multiple forms of racism are enacted on Black bodies.

The window and mirrors work that Betts and Rankine employ in their poetry articulates Blackness in a larger cultural economy. The works explore the complexities of citizenship and cultural identity. I feel that the works articulate the complexities of race and negotiations of humanity within an American consciousness.

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